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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a talk by President George W. Bush in which he launches his quality teacher initiative. He explains that the educational reforms will ensure that all students, particularly impoverished students, will have high expectations and receive a high quality education. As the expectations of schools are raised, nearly $3 billion has been appropriated to states to recruit, prepare, train, and support teachers. This new initiative focuses on such areas as providing elementary school teachers with the tools to teach every child how to read; emphasizing preschool reading skills; establishing a clearinghouse of the most recent and reliable information on what works; recruiting new students into teaching; recruiting teachers via alternate routes (e.g., putting people from other professions into public school classrooms and giving them the training they need); encouraging military personnel, upon retirement, to go into the classroom; supporting teachers who work with disadvantaged students; offering student loan forgiveness to people willing to teach in high-needs schools and subject areas; allowing teachers to enforce discipline without fear of litigation; providing a teacher tax deduction for educational supplies purchased; and giving school districts and states the flexibility to spend federal money on what they need the most. (SM)

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George W. Bush

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The White House
President George W. Bush

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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
March 4, 2002

President Launches Quality Teacher Initiative

- Read the Policy Book
- Policy in Focus: Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers

Eden Prairie High School
Eden Prairie, Minnesota

3:12 P.M. CST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you for that warm welcome. It's nice to be here at the home of the Screaming Eagles. (Applause.) They tell me you've got a good football team. (Applause.) And a good High Pom Squad. (Applause.)

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But I'm really not interested in talking about athletics. (Applause.) I'm here because of the achievements, the academic achievements of the students, the quality of the teaching and the involvement of the parents. (Applause.) I'm here because this is one of America's finest public schools. (Applause.)

I believe strongly in the hope and promise of the public school system all across America. And I know how important it is to thank our teachers; to thank those who come to your classrooms every day; to wish them the best; and to herald such a noble and important profession for the future of our country. I'm here to talk about teaching and its responsibilities and how our country can do a better job of supporting America's teachers. I know -- look, I am sure a lot of you are out there saying, the guy is still talking about teaching. I really get tired of seeing my teacher -- (laughter) -- particularly at test time. (Laughter.) Trust me, you're going to miss your teachers. They're an important part of your life. And they're an important part of our country's future. (Applause.)

I just had a meeting with a group of teachers from all over the area, and I want to thank them for being there to share some thoughts about how to make sure the school systems work as good as they possibly can. I want to thank Jeff, your school's principal, for, gosh, opening up this huge facility and inviting so many people here. I want to thank the Superintendent of Schools, Bill Gaslin. I want to thank my friend, Mark Yudof, from the University of Minnesota, who understands that -- (applause.) About seven people appreciate you, Mark. (Laughter and applause.)

I want to thank -- the reason Mark -- I want to herald Mark is that he understands that in order for a teacher to be able to teach, the teacher colleges have got to teach a curriculum that actually works in the classroom. And I appreciate his leadership.

I want to thank members of the U.S. congressional delegation: Gutknecht and Kennedy and Ramstad, for being here, as well. Thank you all for coming. (Applause.) I want to thank my friend, Norm Coleman, former Mayor of St. Paul, Minnesota. (Applause.) Mary Kiffmeyer, the Secretary of State, is here, as well; thank you, Mary. (Applause.) And Christine Jax, the Education Commissioner of Minnesota is here, too. Thank you all for coming. (Applause.)

Before I talk about the importance of education and teaching, I do want to talk to the students about my desire to defend freedom, to try to put some context to what's taking place overseas into your life.

You know, I'm sure it must have been troubling for high school seniors to turn on their TV -- or high school juniors or sophomores, for that matter -- to see America under attack. When we grew up, the baby boomers and everybody else, we never really thought we'd be attacked. I mean, the last thing that I entered my mind when I was getting out of high school in 1964 is that an enemy would attack America. And, yet, here you are graduating from high school, the first high school class to ever have seen the 48 contiguous states attacked by an enemy.

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And you're probably wondering, why would somebody hit us? And it's because we love freedom. There are people in the world who cannot stand a free society. There are people who do not believe that you should be able to worship freely. There are people who do not believe you should be able to speak freely. There are people who do not believe that young women should be educated. And when they find a nation that's willing to defend freedom, they try to attack it.

And when they attacked us, they thought we were soft and materialistic. They thought our nation had no fiber and no courage. They fell prey to images of a selfish American, a selfish America. And, my, did they make a huge mistake. (Applause.) Because this nation will defend ourselves and freedom at any price. It is too precious a gift -- it is too precious a gift for future generations to give up to terrorists.

You know, I laid out an initiative that said you're either with us or you're against us; wither you stand with America to defend freedom, so that you can grow up, and your children can grow up, in a society, in a civilized world that values individual freedoms. And most nations of the world chose to be with us. And for that, our nation is grateful.

I also said that if you harbor a terrorist, if you feed a terrorist, if you try to encourage a terrorist, you're just as guilty as those who murdered thousands of innocent Americans. And the Taliban has found out exactly what we meant. (Applause.)

I am so proud of our United States military. Many of you who have got relatives in the military, you need to tell them how proud I am of their service and of their sacrifice and of their dedication. (Applause.)

We went into Afghanistan not as conquerors, but as liberators. It's hard for you to believe, I'm certain, that Afghanistan, when it was taken over by the Taliban -- a government that sponsored terrorism, that allowed al Qaeda killers to hide and train in their country -- would not allow young girls to go to school. It's hard for any American to understand how barbaric this regime was. We didn't go in as conquerors, we went in as liberators. And now women and children are free from the clutches of these barbaric people. (Applause.)

People say, well, how long is this going to last? And the answer is, for however long it takes to make sure America is secure. (Applause.) People say, well, the hard part is over with. And my answer is, no, it's not. We're just beginning -- as we learned recently that there's an al Qaeda, a group of al Qaeda killers in a mountainous region in Afghanistan and when we find them bunched up and we find where they are, you can rest assured the United States and our coalition are going to hunt 'em down; that these are people that if we allow to go free, could easily come back and harm the American citizens.

And so we sent teams in and there is some serious combat as I speak, and lives are lost. And we send our prayers and tears to those whose families have lost life. But I want to assure the students who are here and the loved ones of those military, defending freedom is a noble cause and it is a just cause. And so long as I am the President of the United States, I will pursue those who want to hurt America and who want to take away our freedoms. (Applause.)

I'm confident that over time, we'll prevail. I'm confident that this mighty nation has got the patience and the determination and the will to succeed. And when we do, the world will be better off.

And I'm confident that we can do what we need to do here at home to make sure every child is educated. It is so important that we achieve that objective. I was fortunate enough to be the President at a time when the people in Congress realized that -- maybe with a little bit of my persuasion -- that we needed to reform our school system. And I signed an historic reform bill. It was one of those wonderful moments in Washington where a group of us put aside our party politics -- said, it's okay to be a Republican, it's okay to be a Democrat, but what's most important is to function on what's best for America. And we got a bill done. (Applause.)

It's a good piece of education reform that says that in America, we believe in educating every child -- each and every child. (Applause.) And that we must bring high hopes and high standards to every school and every neighborhood all across America. (Applause.)

As a result of this bill, parents will know whether their child or their child's school is succeeding in meeting that ambitious goal. Because schools will have to test and publish the results. From now on, teaching reading will be the first priority of every elementary school in America.

My friend, Phyllis Hunter put it best: the new civil right in America is teaching every single child to read. (Applause.) And from now on, schools in low income neighborhoods will have the same high expectations as everybody else. (Applause.)

These reforms were passed in Washington, but the success of the reform will ultimately come down to the teacher in the classroom. There are of really great teachers in America. I know you've got a lot of really great teachers here. (Applause.) But we want to make sure there is a great teacher in every classroom.

And it starts by making sure that teachers coming out of teacher schools know how to teach the subjects that they're going to take into the classroom. Interestingly enough, now, about 35 states require new teachers to take an exit exam -- an entrance exam into the teaching profession to make sure that they can pass the test in the subject they teach.

Sometimes, the standard is so low that all you have to do is answer half the questions and you're in. That doesn't make sense to me. And, you know, it doesn't make sense to good teachers. Teachers want their profession to have the highest of high standards. And so in order to make sure every school has got a teacher, we're going to work with the states to make sure that the exit exams -- those exams for teachers being, going into the teaching ranks, exiting college, have high standards, that they can pass a test in the subject they're going to teach and that every teacher be licensed or certified.

Every public school teacher in America must demonstrate competence in his or her field of instruction. If we want to have a teaching profession that is held in high regard, we must have confidence in the teacher colleges and those coming into the teacher ranks that they can do the job expected of them. We owe it to the parents. And, most of all, we owe it to the students.

We also understand what a good teacher can accomplish in a young life. Our new economy demands higher and higher skills and good teachers provide those skills. But it's only one part of the teacher's job. Just as life is more than a race to the riches -- and life should be more than a race to the riches -- education is more than a search for skills. Look, you probably have already forgotten the isosceles triangle or photosynthesis. (Laughter.) But hopefully you did learn how to try hard and how to work hard, and how to take pride in your work, exactly what your teachers are teaching you.

You learn to study, and you learn to communicate. And you learn to appreciate the living truth of history and literature. A good teacher instills a sense of your own possibilities, along with your willingness to respect other people. We ask a lot of our teachers. We expect them to teach knowledge and skills. We expect them to welcome measurement and accountability. We expect them to have sound character. And we expect them to teach by example.

And the teachers have a right to expect certain things in return. They have a right to expect every child will come to school ready to learn, and that good manners and respect for teachers will be taught at home. (Applause.) And that's the responsibility of moms and dads. After all, a parent is a child's first teacher. And when the children show up for school, they should already know the basics of good manners and good discipline.

Teachers are also entitled to expect some things from government. As we raise the expectations of our schools, we must give our schools the tools to succeed. As we ask more of our teachers, we must take their side. We must be their allies. And all of us, all around America, must give them the support they need to do their jobs. (Applause.)

My administration is supporting teachers and getting the training they need to raise educational standards. We have appropriated nearly $3 billion made available to states to recruit, to prepare and to train teachers. That is more than a 35 percent increase over last year's budget. (Applause.)

This is the greatest federal commitment to quality teachers and principals. And it's important and it's necessary if we're going to achieve the reforms inherent in the no child left behind bill. Much of the training will focus on specific needs, like special education and math and science instruction, and early reading.

The truth of the matter is, if we don't teach the children to read, they're not going to understand math and science. We have got to make sure our elementary school teachers have the skills and tools necessary to teach every child in America how to read. (Applause.) And that means starting in pre-school. And that means making sure that the pre-school teachers know what works.

And that's why I heralded Mark Yudof. Listen, reading is a science. Mark said, well, explain what you mean by reading is a science. That means teach what works. We know what works. Some reading programs sound good, but they don't work. Let's use curriculum that actually works. Phonics works and it needs to be an integral part of the reading curriculum all around America. (Applause.)

And so one of the things we're doing is setting up a clearing house of the most recent and reliable information on what works so that districts and teachers can access information and, if need be, change curriculum so that standards are met and no children are simply shuffled through the school system because they may seem to be hard to educate. (Applause.)

So there's money in the budget for training, retention and recruitment. And we'll also support teachers by welcoming more talent and experience into the ranks. Over the next decade, school districts will need to hire 2.2 million teachers. And we must recruit new teachers. And we must remind people, if you're looking for something to do that will have an incredible impact on people's lives, think about, when you go to college, getting a teacher's certificate. Think about going into the classroom. It is such a noble and important profession.

But there are also other ways to attract. For example, I'm a strong supporter, as is the administration, for a program called Teach for America, which recruits and trains outstanding college graduates to teach for at least two years in our neediest public schools. We're increasing funding for a program called Transition for Teaching, a program that puts professionals, like lawyers and accountants and scientists, into public school classrooms, and give them the teacher training they need.

I'm also committed to expanding a great program called Troops to Teachers, which encourages military personnel, upon retirement, to get into the classroom, to bring the skills they have learned in the defense of the United States to the children of the United States. These are programs all aimed at recruiting people, encouraging people, and giving people the skills necessary to enjoy one of life's most noble professions, teaching children. (Applause.)

My administration will support teachers who are committed to educating disadvantaged students. Education -- education is the surest way out of poverty. (Applause.) Children who live in low-income neighborhoods can succeed, absolutely. But they need people willing to teach them. Many schools in high poverty areas are having trouble finding -- filling the teacher vacancies. So we'll help them by expanding student loan forgiveness for teachers willing to teach math, science and special education in these schools for at least five years.

Right now our government forgives up to $5,000 in student loans. If someone is willing to teach math, science or special ed in a school that is having trouble recruiting teachers, then we ought to forgive up to $17,500 in student loans. (Applause.)

I just met with Patrick Pelini. He's an English teacher at Patrick Henry High School, in Minneapolis. Here's what he said. He said that low-income students are hungry to be taught. He said that mentoring and teaching students in his school has been a tremendously gratifying experience for Patrick. Let me tell you something, this guy is committed. He is a solid citizen of your state. He is focused and dedicated on making sure every child gets educated. If he had any student loans, they ought to be forgiven.

But the next Patricks ought to have their student loans forgiven, so that they end up teaching in these schools where it's having trouble recruiting teachers. It makes sense, it's good public policy, and if we want to make sure no child is left behind, let's encourage really bright, smart people to head into those schools. (Applause.)

We will support our teachers by allowing them to enforce discipline in the classrooms. (Applause.) So behave yourself. (Laughter.)

Albert Shanker said this. He was a great advocate for teachers. He said, the amount of disruption in our schools is much larger than it needs to be because it's tolerated. He knew that learning only takes place in an atmosphere of order. And for the sake of the teachers, we must make sure they're in charge of their classrooms. And we took a huge step in that direction in the new bill I signed.

And it's because of this -- many teachers are wary of imposing discipline, because they might be sued. Somebody might file a lawsuit against them. Well, because of what we call the Teacher Protection law, teachers and principals and other school professionals can take reasonable actions to maintain order and discipline in the classroom without the fear of being hauled into court. (Applause.)

We are taking frivolous lawsuits out of the learning process, and empowering teachers to be able to maintain order in their classrooms. America is going to be a lot better off for this law I signed. And so will the teaching profession. (Applause.)

One of the interesting initiatives that I hope Congress passes is this one: Committed teachers often times have to buy supplies for their students out of their own pocket. The average across the nation is $400 per teacher. And yet they cannot deduct that from their income taxes. Look, if a business person can take somebody out to lunch and deduct it, teachers ought to be allowed to deduct the supplies they purchase for their classrooms. (Applause.)

And finally, I understand that all wisdom isn't in Washington, D.C. As a matter of fact -- there is some wisdom there. (Laughter.) But if you're interested in quality education, if you really want to make a huge difference in making sure the public schools meet the high standards and high objectives, you've got to trust the local people to make the right decisions for the schools. You've got to trust the parents and teachers and principals and school board members, in order to chart the path for excellence. (Applause.)

And part of that means giving school districts and states the flexibility to spend federal money on what they need the most. Some districts will provide incentives for new teachers. If you're having trouble attracting a teacher, you can use your federal monies to attract teachers. Some will want to spend more money on teacher development. Many districts may want to use it to increase teacher pay. Flexibility with federal money will help local folks meet the needs in order to chart the path for excellence, so every child learns. (Applause.)

And so, in Washington, we're working to enhance the professionalism of the teacher ranks, and in reminding America what a noble profession teaching is. We talk about teacher training and teacher recruitment and teacher authority and local control of schools.

I want the teachers here to know how much I respect what you do, and how I appreciate the effort and care and compassion you show on a daily basis. (Applause.) One of the young teachers in there said, you know, I decided that I wanted to teach instead of trying to get rich. That attitude is a fabulous attitude for America. It's really what I think is going to come out of this attack by the evil people. I think we're all beginning to take a hard look at the value of life, why we're here on the face of the Earth.

You know, today we've got a guy named Will Gove with us. Will is right here. (Applause.) Let me tell you something about Will. Can I say your age? Eighty-three. (Applause.) World War II vet -- (applause) -- social entrepreneur. Here's a guy -- I think he said he could sit around a 19th hole drinking martinis if he wanted to. (Laughter.) Was it martinis or beer? Anyway, instead he builds soccer fields. Instead, he reads newspaper articles so that blind folks can get the news. Instead, he is a mentor. Instead, this guy is a soldier in the army of compassion, which exists all across America. (Applause.)

Will, I want to thank you for your example, for your living example of someone who puts his heart and soul into making our community a better place; someone who understands that you ought to love somebody just like you want to be loved yourself; that a complete life is one that is much greater than simple materialism.

The enemy hit us; they thought we were a materialistic society. But they didn't know we were made up of Wills. They didn't know, truly, what the fabric of our country was made out of.

You know, one of the things that I hear a lot of youngsters asking is, what can I do in the war against terror? What can I do to be a part of my nation's efforts to defend freedom? Well, let me tell you what you can do. You can make somebody's life better off. You can walk into a shut-in's house on a daily basis and say, what can I do to help you. You can mentor a child. You can go to your church or your synagogue or your mosque, and you can put together a food drive. You can make somebody's life better.

In order to stand up in the face of evil, you can do something good. It's the millions of acts of kindness and decency and compassion that define America, and stand strong in the face of evil. (Applause.)

USAfreedomcorps.gov is a place where you can go if you're interested in serving somebody greater than yourself, a cause greater than yourself, to help somebody in need. If you want to figure out some way to enrich your life, think about being a teacher. Or think about following the example of Will. If you anything to do something, think about my friend, Mary Copeland, who runs a prayer service, who understands the importance of faith in people's lives. With faith in people's lives, you can kick drugs and alcohol, and you can realize a better tomorrow. (Applause.)

What I'm saying to the students is, you're fortunate to live in a great nation -- a nation not defined by its government, but a nation defined by values that we hold dear, and a nation defined by the hearts and souls of decent and loving and caring people.

I'm proud of our country. I'm optimistic of our future. And I'm honored to be the President of the greatest nation on the face of the Earth. God bless you all. Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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